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Enriching lives through the joy of lifelong learning

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### Toto's Ruin

*This issue begins with a letter from CSC President, Maryanne Ward. On page 3 you will find a wonderful recounting of CSC Instructor Michael Uhl's adventures on the island of Sicily, farming olives and enjoying the countryside. Please consider sending one of your own stories for the eNewsletter. We hope to include more personal stories in the future.*



*Dear CSC Members and Friends:*

*During the May 6, 2021 Annual meeting, I delivered a report to those who attended. Please go to <http://coastalseniorcollege.org/> to read a copy of that report. It outlines our plans for the future including in-person, Zoom and hybrid classes. As I write in mid-May all the classes are scheduled for Zoom, but we are actively investigating other options for very small classes and a site which may be open to us in the fall. We are in the wait and see mode as far as sites are concerned.*

*While the sites are out of our control, the curriculum isn't and our Curriculum Committee is hard at work soliciting and evaluating course proposals for the fall. I have had a sneak preview of the incomplete list which includes a course on revenge in Shakespeare's plays, the interaction of culture and technology, the Brontës' Gothic fiction, a virtual stroll through the solar system, Maine landscape and literature, short stories by Welty and O' Connor and more to come. If sites open up, we will add in person classes. We are recruiting new teachers to strengthen our already powerful faculty. An exciting fall catalog will be available in late August. Be sure to check out the offerings for other Senior Colleges as well.*

*The Curriculum Committee is also discussing shorter format courses in years to come. We had some wonderful suggestions from you on the Course Evaluation forms. Keep your ideas coming and remember to spread the word to others about CSC.*

*We also would really enjoy more contributions to our newsletter. Poems, reviews, recipes, memories, what's growing in your garden: help us get to you and bring enjoyment to others in CSC.*

*Best wishes for a careful and great summer with friends and family. I will be returning to the Coastal Botanical Gardens as a docent, so please wave if you see me wandering the grounds or giving a tour. I am really amazed by the new installation by a Danish sculptor – giant trolls made of wood. They are almost as much fun as our puffins!*

*Stay safe and keep reading!*

*Maryanne*

*P.S. – If you are looking for summer reading, once I have completed it I will post next year's Mystery Monday reading list on the website under Groups.*

## Addio Sicilia

### Preface

What follows is a personal history organized into discrete vignettes called ‘Cantos,’ of an adventure that spread sixteen months over a decade between 2000 and 2010, when I – and eventually my wife – sojourned and farmed olives on the island of Sicily. I have set myself the task of capturing the flavor, not the totality, of the experience, and so the telling requires a compression of material that might easily fill a book. In style my descriptions vary from the impressionistic to photographic. And while much of the account is linear, it begins mid-stream with a flashback, and like-episodes which may have occurred years apart will, in places, be joined within a single thematic frame.

This work is being written and circulated in a serial fashion. Eighteen Cantos are currently in draft; these three are the first installment. Benvenuto...



## Canto Uno Lucchese

At the foot of a hill we'd pass when walking in Lucchese, a green zone that rimmed the city limits, a staked sign had suddenly appeared: SI VENDE TERRENO. A wide landscape of discrete olive groves surrounded us, and one of them was now for sale.

This was the autumn of 2006. Susan had joined me in Sciacca twice a year since the spring of '04. We often stayed for a month, lightly renovating the apartment I'd bought just before we met three years earlier, and, whenever it pleased us, exploring the island's interior in search of a heritage site or a local trattoria.

We spared time for rambling among the olive groves, a few with piles of block and stucco that served as rustic retreats for local families. Their forbearers may have harvested these same trees, and tilled the fields around them. They may have lived in what remained the dominant feature in this landscape, a half-ruined *baglio* at the end of a long dirt drive, which never failed to entertain my imagination.

The manor house of a middling landlord stood more or less intact. As did remnants in the courtyard of the hovels lined like stalls in a barn that once housed *i cuntadini*, dependent on the *patron* for life and limb. The *baglio* was an enclosure that offered landless toilers safety in numbers, to deter the bandits who roamed the nearby mountains, or so the story goes. Now their descendants resided and subsisted in the city. On weekends some still decamped to the *campagna*. Tending olive trees was in their blood, and in their midst we came like time travelers from a distant star.

Armed with the brand of hubris that Americans uniquely possess, we resolved to join them. We made inquiries about the land, coughed up a two-thousand-euro deposit, and bound ourselves legally to complete the deal when we returned the following spring. It would price out, fees included, just shy of ten grand U.S. Signori Vincenzo La Bella, the seller, had no qualms about permitting us such hours as we chose before we left for home, to commune with the two acre hillside, and the 150 olive trees planted upon it; we counted them.

## Canto Due

### Monika

A cheap ticket on a fair wind had first brought me to Sicily in the year 2000. After landing, I plowed through the congested core of Catania, well-schooled in aggressive urban motorways from years in Manhattan and Brooklyn, and pointed my rented Fiat to the south.

My well-oiled travel writer gear kicked in by default. I was programmed to sample the stunning Greek relics in Siracusa, and gawk with delight at the baroque marvels that Noto and Ragusa brought forth after a devastating earthquake. But it was not my method, whether on assignment, or on my own, to just cherry pick the ‘must see’ attractions. I would take the measure of the whole, whether a large country like Brazil, possessed, not incidentally, of its own baroque enchantments, or a single great metropolis like Chicago with its balkanized urban neighborhoods; I’d authored guides to both destinations for Frommer’s. At hand I had the rival Lonely Planet guide to plot my general plan, which was to encircle the entire island. I was eager for a seaside road trip easy on the eye, maybe not quite the sweeping seascapes of the Pacific Highway, but, in snatches at least, unobstructed vistas of the Mediterranean, its shoreline coves and beaches; and maybe a digression on the back roads that led to them.

This fantasy crashed quickly against a chain-like succession of petrochemical plants and oil refineries. A tedious semi-industrial helter-skelter masked the coastline all the way to where one roadside view opened on a port cluttered with tankers and container ships. Reaching the smelly outskirts of Agrigento, I was now spurred by a compulsion to make time in the hope of outdistancing my disappointment. I already suspected that Sicily might hide its charms in many unexpected corners, but I was losing daylight, and besides, feeling too deflated to wander off the beaten track and test that premise. I had no way of anticipating then that I would return to Sicily over and over to explore those corners, and revisit on several occasions one attraction not three miles from downtown Agrigento, the remains of Greek temple ruins spread over a thousand acres. To alone behold the state of preservation of the Tempio della Concordia (ca. 450 BCE), is worth the price of admission.

At dusk, another 40 miles on, I entered the city of Sciacca where I hoped to spend the night. This is where a guide book comes in handy; not to tell you what to see, but where to stay. A modest hotel on the eastern edge of town served the purpose. The next morning a riot of jack hammers on the sidewalk across from the hotel drove me from my bed. After a cup of real coffee that marks the Italian standard, I set out on the principal corso to explore the center.

As someone acculturated to the New World, American branch, I am hyper conscious, whenever visiting Europe, of traveling into the past. Sciacca's Corso Vittorio Emanuele II is such a portal, a principal artery crossing the oldest part of a city, walled in olden times, and approached through massive stone gates, three of which, I would later learn, still stood. Along the corso, palazzi and churches, in no particular historical order, testify to changing architectural aptitudes and fashions of remote eras. They are the atmosphere that sustains the knowledge of where I am and where I am not; I do not study them.

The two features off the corso I couldn't take my eyes off were the chock-a-block clusters of human habitations spread over a hillside, rising toward the interior, and, across the thoroughfare on the seaside, a lengthy, capacious piazza perched above the port and opening beyond to the endless horizon of the Mediterranean. These were sightings of the here and now that wanted time to season, and therefore more agreeable lodgings; among the store fronts I spotted the tourist office, and ducked inside.

There was a buzz throughout the Italian hospitality industry in those days about an emerging *agriturismo* sector. When I attempted to solicit information from the attendant on-duty about any local farm family who had opened their home to travelers, I confronted a reality I would soon find commonplace: English is not widely spoken off tourism's beaten path in Sicily. Italians may come to Sicily on their holidays, but few continental English speakers, much less Americans, not at least to this backwater on the island's southern coast. A novelty stood before her, and she seemed momentarily nonplussed, if not stunned, by my presence.

I'd been on a different cultural tack the past few years, and the language I was studying was German. Once my fascination with Sicily took hold, I would throw myself into Italian. But on this occasion I had to muddle through, probing with bits of Spanish and Portuguese, two romance languages I did speak, hoping to hit the target with as many cognates as possible. The attendant, not to lose face, countered with such English as she could summon from school days decades removed. From these fonts we constructed a lingua franca. She let it be known that a new listing had only come into her hands that might suit me, fished out a number and dialed the phone. Reaching someone, and after a brief exchange, she announced in triumph that a man would pick me up in ten minutes, and take me to the outskirts of town where he offered lodgings as close as she could come to satisfying my request.

When a large Volvo station wagon approached on the corso and stopped, the driver, a handsome fortyish year-old man, dark maned and of medium stature, and wearing a friendly, if enigmatic smile, jumped out and introduced himself.

“My name is Salvatore. Come along,” he said, the words spoken in lightly accented British English. “If you decide to stay, we’ll come back to fetch your car.”

Salvatore drove gingerly through a maze of narrow lanes in which the oversized Volvo dwarfed its Italian equivalents, Fiats in every configuration, among which the tiny absurd *cinquecento*, and the ubiquitous three wheeled *apes* powered by Vespas, and, shooting in and out among them, the endless swarms of noisy daredevil scooters. We left the city on a perimeter road that opened to the panorama of a wide valley against a dramatic mountainous backdrop, and entered a dirt drive into Verdetecnica’s *Case del Vivaio*, a honeycomb of efficiency rentals that shared the grounds of a working nursery.

I would have met Pascale then, Salvatore’s French wife, his partner in this enterprise. I took the room she showed me immediately. There were, in addition to the host family’s private quarters, five rental units, some two story, and some one, all in single block and with the names of the first woman who occupied them. Pascale put me in the Monika. All the accommodations were stocked with rustic furnishings, had sleeping areas, eat-in kitchens, and maybe an alcove to lounge in. There was a private patio outside your door that faced a pleasant patch of greenery in an inner courtyard bordered at one end by a pair of professional greenhouses. The compound occupied a steep rise in relative isolation above the road we’d arrived on, some hundred feet below. Exotic plants in enormous pots were scattered everywhere, the kinds of plantings that might adorn the grounds of a wealthy client.

At this first meeting, Salvatore – Toto – Maniscalco was still working in his profession as a landscape architect; and Pascale Dodin as a translator and interpreter for delegations of French speaking Tunisians who came to Sicily, for what purpose I can't recall. The couple cared for their two young sons, and were attentive hosts to their transient guests.

## Canto Tre

### Citta'

I could have found no better base for expanding my time in Sciacca than the Monika, at a geographical mid-point for my itineraries over the next several days. I am a walker. A 90 block stroll in Manhattan was de rigueur for me. Once installed across the East River, on winter evenings every Thursday I would walk from Park Slope across the Brooklyn Bridge to a gym in Greenwich Village for a weekly basketball game. Walking around Sciacca for hours, or on long hikes to the *campagna* after Toto introduced me to Lucchese, was the habit of a dedicated flaneur. Much of what I ever wanted to know about a place was found, not at the point of departure nor at the destination, but in between. The point was to keep moving.

An enticing stretch of road taken when I tagged along with Toto to the countryside would prove the case. Over many month-long stays to come, my feet would engrave a trail on the Via Fontana Calda. The inspection of the concrete surface over a culvert on the dirt track leading to his own property, was the mission that morning. The bridge, a few yards in length, had suffered one half-assed repair job after another, and seemed so precarious, I was amazed that Toto risked crossing it with the Volvo. But this was his market, so to speak, and he knew what it would bear. Winding our way between the stands of olive trees that occupied both side of the road, Toto

stopped the car in front of a half-ruined structure, a couple of standing walls amidst a pile of rubble.

Here he intended to build a rental villa, but an arcane law that designated the ruin as a treasure of the national heritage prevented him from doing so. Eventually he would surmount this obstacle, for, as I would learn from my own future head-butting sessions with the Italian bureaucracy, every problem for which you are told there is no solution, has a solution.

Much of what a walker passes over massif-dotted terrain from Verdetecnica en route to the city is not pretty. There are dwellings on scrappy plots that, while inhabited, remained frozen in mid-construction, unfinished orange colored blocks and rebar pointing to an eventual second or third story when the owners' fortunes improved. The streetscape is strewn with rubbish, a disturbing absence of stewardship for public spaces virtually endemic throughout Sicily. Feral dogs, solitary or in small packs snarl from the roadside before skulking off in fear of being showered with stones by some sadistic passerby. [Memo: buy dog biscuits].

I entered the fringe of the working-class quarter through the San Calogero Gate onto the Piazza San Michele, ringed by monumental antiquities, churches and cloisters, extant stretches of the old wall and some fine residential buildings. From the piazza, a web of twisting alleyways descends through the *zona popolare* in every direction. Confined within its compass points is the vast inventory of the Sciacca's vintage inner-city housing stock. Some gentrification, though rare, was in evidence, where exterior walls had been restored and brightly painted. But the typical structure was a bone colored, often mold-blotched, two or three story rectilinear box stuck cheek by jowl with its neighbors, the skyline dictated by an untamed topography.

To meander here was a day dreamer's utopia, no doubt projecting myself into this scene. This was an old tick: I've never felt my anonymity more protected than when hidden in full view

among strangers. If any more concrete fantasy was afloat it was well below the threshold of awareness. That I required the romance of offbeat foreign travel in regular doses to blunt some of the alienation I felt toward my own tribe, didn't translate into an immediate plan to scratch that itch by returning here. I was in a moment, happily detached in my reverie.

Any number of the cobble paved byways navigating the hive will deposit a walker on the Via Licata, a narrow commercial street at the bottom of the hill. I followed one of them straight to the grande piazza that overlooks the sea and had filled my eyes on that first morning's walk along the Vittorio Emanuele. The classical form with minimal adornments predominates in Sciacca, and the Piazza Angelo Scandaliato embraces the dignity and simplicity of that style. It's so blessedly minimal, uncluttered. The dimensions of the space suggest an abbreviated air strip, a rectangle four, maybe five, times longer than wide.

A pedestrian enters the piazza where a line of lush ficus trees with rounded tops is spaced along the corso. On the opposite side, overlooked by majestic palms, a waist high barrier of iron grill work stands where the ground drops off sharply, and, at the edge of a precipice, defines an observation point for scanning the lower town, the fishing port and the sea. At the piazza's eastern end is a *pasticceria* with the best commercial location in the city, but by no means the best pastry; anchoring the western end is the elongated and weathered brick facade of a reconstructed 16<sup>th</sup> century church where a modest Doric pediment over the doorway and an obtuse triangular roof line, the whole effect, while strikingly handsome, suggested that, over the ages, here and elsewhere in the city, the available building fund lacked surplus for the purely decorative.

The Piazza Scandaliato, known vernacularly as the *piazza del popolo*, is the stage set for many of Sciacca's rituals, quotidian and seasonal (a la the Lenten *Carnevale*). By day, strollers

have their private agendas, some merely crossing over to the long twisting network of stairs that zig zag down to the port.

I observed old men clustered throughout the city, as if marking territory, striking proprietary poses from chairs that front their favored cafes; but also a fixed presence on benches in the piazza. They uniformly meet the curious gaze – my first mistake – of a passing stranger in the land with cold suspicious eyes.

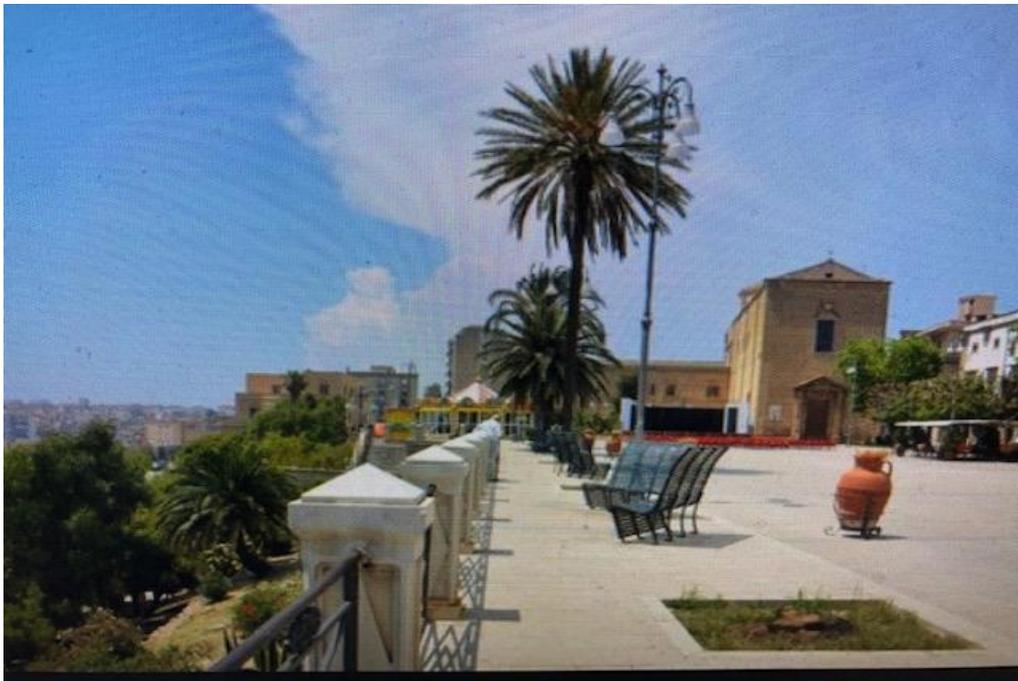
Of their womenfolk I saw quite a few, in the hillside foot traffic, sturdy, built close to the ground, burdened with groceries and shrouded in black woolen garments as if there had never been a time they weren't in mourning. I hazard that these are men and women of the old agricultural caste, trapped in urban ghettos like the old quarter in what is, after all, among Europe's poorest and most highly unemployed countries; for – and I postpone the argument – Sicily is best understood, not as a Italian region, but as a distinct European *country*.

It is not these displaced country people, but the better-settled burghers you will see when the weather is fine – and it often is – on the evening promenade in this grand public space. Costumed in their stodgy provincial fashions, they seemed as indifferent to the remote salons of posh Milano as they were to the presence of a tall, palpably Anglo Saxon man who walked among them.

In family units, or pairs of friends, arm in arm, male or female, they glide in leisurely strides, back and forth, back and forth. “*Buona sera,*” you will hear as one set of familiars passes another; whereas the professional men condescend to all, but recognize their peers with a courtly bow and through the titles of their degrees. “*Buona sera dottore... ingegnere... avvocato... architetto...* I had the sensation of witnessing something that, if it had ever existed in my own

culture, had long disappeared. Entering the insular society of such a group had no appeal for me; it was the time warp they occupied that was drawing me in.

I left Sciacca with these impressions, an intimate juxtaposition of extremes: the dense working-class quarter and the spacious serenity of the olive groves, the manageable scale of the place and the proximity of the sea, the availability of lodgings like the Monika under the tutelage of friendly hosts, and, not to be gainsaid, the candidacy of a European destination for an extended stay, not sightseeing, that my modest circumstances might stretch to afford.



**La piazza del popolo**



**Via Fontana Calda**



**Old Men in Piazza**



**Verdetecnic**



**Sciacca Nov '04**



**Zona Popolare**

*Do you have a travel story you would like to share? Please send it to [http://cscenewsletter@gmail.com](mailto:cscenewsletter@gmail.com)*

Any questions or comments, please send an email to Cecile at [cscenewsletter@gmail.com](mailto:cscenewsletter@gmail.com)